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ABSTRACT

This newsletter provides examples from four small, rural school districts of how innovative superintendents plan and provide resources and provide staff development, which are two of the six ways that school administrators effect change. The superintendents are located in a small poor district in the Arkansas Mississippi Delta region, a primarily Hispanic small city in northeastern New Mexico, a small rural K-12 school in Oklahoma, and a northeastern Oklahoma district in which 75 percent of students are Native American. Interviews with the four superintendents describe how they go about implementing their visions of school improvement by identifying important educational needs or deficiencies, by aggressively searching for supplemental funding, and by promoting staff development opportunities that involve teachers in the change process. The superintendents offer guidelines and advice to other administrators implementing change in small or rural school districts. Tips include: identify special needs and select programs for needs; utilize available state and service agency resources; identify school budget funding resources; subscribe to the "Federal Register"; write and submit grant proposals; train staff for grant writing; survey needs of parents; replicate successful programs; identify and visit model schools; assist in passage of bond issues; network with colleagues; work with local higher education institutions; conduct workshops; and use available community resources. Contains 10 references. (RE)

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Superintendents of Small Districts and School Improvement: Planning, Providing Resources and Professional Development

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Volume 3, Number 1 1993

Issues . . . *about Change*

Superintendents of Small Districts and School Improvement: Planning, Providing Resources and Professional Development

Leaders are change-makers, and previous studies provide insights into what leaders **do** to make change happen. In general, six strategies that a school administrator uses, often simultaneously, to effect change have been identified. Previous *Issues...about Change* have described the research regarding these strategies: articulating the vision; planning and providing resources; training; monitoring; coaching; and creating a culture and context for change (Hord & Czerwinski, 1991; Boyd, 1992a). Two of these strategies, creating a context for change and developing and articulating a shared vision, have been discussed in greater detail in previous *Issues...about Change* (see Boyd, 1992b and Méndez-Morse, 1993). This paper will provide examples from rural and small districts of two of the other strategies used by leaders to implement their visions of improved schools. In particular, how four superintendents of small and rural districts plan and provide resources, and provide staff development will be examined.

There are many positive aspects of rural and small schools. Jorgensen and Epsey (1986, cited in Tift & Ley, 1990) note the following elements that rural and small schools often have to offer: the absence of bureaucratic barriers, thus allowing more flexibility and quicker decision making; a sense of community and family interdependence with the school; the right size to give personal attention; a slower pace of living and working; raising children in a more controlled environment; and smaller classes. Along with these positive features, however, there are problems faced by superintendents of rural and small districts. Kennedy and Barker (1989) point out that teachers in these districts are more isolated from ongoing developments in education; teach a greater variety of courses, often without adequate staff development; often have outdated and/or inadequate supplies, and receive lower salaries. "A successful rural school administrator must possess a variety of skills and abilities in order to appropriately meet the divergent needs of teachers, students, parents, and community members" (Kennedy & Barker, 1989, p. S2).

The superintendent's role is critical as an agent of change. Hill, Wise, and Shapiro (1989) found that "no...effort studied caught fire without an active superintendent willing to ...attack the school system's inertia" (p.20). The literature focused specifically on the role of superintendents in rural and small districts in effecting change is limited. However, one study found that superintendents of rural and small districts play a direct role as change agents because they are in the "unique position of being able to mobilize not only...staff, but the community as well" (Jacobson, 1989, p.108). In order to provide examples of this direct role, Southwest Educational Development Laboratory (SEDL) staff interviewed four school administrators experienced in change imple-

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mentation. Carlos Atencio, Max Duncan, Don McHan, and Carthal Means, asking them to describe their experiences with school improvement.

Planning and Providing Resources

Don McHan is the superintendent of a small district located in the Mississippi Delta region, one of the poorest regions in the United States. A dearth of essential resources in the area has a direct impact on the school population — little or no access to medical care or access to psychological services accompanies high teenage pregnancy rates and many premature births. The population, furthermore, is declining as residents move to other communities seeking employment opportunities.

Working with limited resources, McHan strives to provide a quality education for his students. He explains, "If we have a need, and we determine that through our planning process by looking at our data, then we go looking for something to solve that need." He sends staff members to grant writing workshops where they learn how to obtain resources to fund innovative programs within the district. He pulls from the expertise of the Arkansas State Department of Education as a readily available resource. The district uses an Eisenhower grant for math and science improvement and a Carl Perkins grant for vocational education. A program to pay childcare expenses and provide counseling services for teen parents was funded through a grant written by a staff member. Acquisition of computer equipment for the school's vocational program was also obtained through grant monies.

In addition, the Arkansas State Department of Education awarded two restructuring grants to McHan's district. The grants were awarded to the upper elementary school and to the high school for the purposes of studying and implementing curriculum revisions, staff development, and implementation of site based management.

To keep abreast of resources available, McHan attends workshops, belongs to the state administrator's organization, and the Arkansas Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD). He has joined Education Research Service as a source for research-based programs to use to meet his district's needs.

Carlos Atencio was the superintendent of the public school system in a primarily Hispanic small city in the northeastern part of New Mexico. Atencio made personal observations of middle schools in the area and concluded that they were being run like "mini high schools — no wonder they were called 'junior highs.'" He conducted research on the best ways to meet the needs of middle school students by studying middle school models in the area and visiting a successful middle school in Albuquerque that was using the family concept method. Over the course of a year, Atencio sent many of his middle-school staff members to visit the school in Albuquerque. They returned inspired with the vision after seeing its practical application. Staff felt confident in setting realistic goals for moving their school towards the family concept method.

Working with the counselor and principal, Atencio hired new staff members and guided the rearrangement of physical space to accommodate the implementation of the family concept model. After the middle school principal's retirement, Atencio was instrumental in the selection of a new principal committed to the middle school concept and the passage of a bond issue to

finance renovations and improvement at the school that helped create a more familial atmosphere.

Atencio was involved in the Northern New Mexico Network, a network of rural school districts interested in educational leadership issues. The Network was interested in Atencio's work restructuring the middle school, and his first contact with the New Mexico Leadership Academy occurred through his involvement in the Network. The Academy is funded by the Rockefeller Foundation and is designed to train leadership teams in the process of school improvement. These efforts directly target students who are not "thriving learners." Atencio found that "we shared common goals and a vision for educational change."

Max Duncan was the superintendent of a small rural K-12 school in Oklahoma. The school has a total of 130 students housed in a single building. Duncan knew a professor at the University of Oklahoma who had been involved in the implementation of an Effective Schools Program at another rural school, so Duncan contacted him about helping implement the program in his district. Sending teachers a few at a time, Duncan eventually saw to it that all the teachers in the district visited the model school. They came away saying "They aren't doing anything that we can't do, so what is making the difference?" This kind of "can-do" attitude helped motivate the staff for change.

Duncan regards himself as only one piece of the problem-solving puzzle and worked closely with staff to come up with solutions to problems. He describes his role as being supportive and providing staff the materials or "whatever they need to help them." Together with his staff, Duncan felt the next step needed was training. He was notified by the Oklahoma State Department of Education of grant monies available for schools on the state's at-risk list because of low test scores. Duncan took advantage of this opportunity and his district was one of twenty-five in the state of Oklahoma awarded a grant to be involved in Marva Collins training to raise expectations for student performance. Marva Collins teaches inner city children in Chicago emphasizing high expectations, self-esteem, and public speaking incorporating a traditional curriculum.

Superintendent Carthal Means often says, "I've never had an original idea." Means shares the credit for many of the innovations developed in his school district: he gives credit to his connections with high-level people; many ideas are generated by the community; his staff is receptive to new ideas and excellent at following through on them; and the district has collaborated with different organizations to utilize resources.

Means has been the superintendent at a school district in northeastern Oklahoma for twenty-five years. Approximately seventy-five percent of the students in his district are Native American. Means planned a curriculum based on the concept of right-brain learning styles. The school district is located close to the Cherokee Nation, and Means is included in many of the Cherokee Nation's educational planning and other activities.

With the help of five colleagues, including Dr. Anne Bell at Northeastern State University, Tahlequah, Oklahoma, renowned for her work on brain functioning research, Means designed a bilingual (Cherokee/English) psycho-motor program curriculum. Extensive planning went into the implementation of the program in stages over a three-year period. Several

staffing changes were necessary to ensure a bilingual program. If a teacher could not speak Cherokee, a bilingual assistant was hired. The staff was motivated with the attitude, "I can do it, and it is going to work!"

Means views the community as a resource for the school and the school as a resource for the community. He conducts frequent parent surveys both in homes and at meetings to keep in touch with the needs of the community, then school staff prioritize the needs of the school based on the survey results. The community feels they are being listened to, and are able to see results. School resources have been used to provide community education programs, including computer classes, water aerobics, and arthritis swim sessions in collaboration with an arthritis foundation. Community resources are in turn tapped to provide support for the school. High school students from a nearby district provide after-school tutoring for young students and a "Granny" program in which older volunteers serve as classroom aides.

Because the school system is small, rural, and in an economically depressed area, Means has been able to utilize federal funding for many of his programs. To discern what funds are available, he subscribes to the *Federal Register*. In addition to their other responsibilities, two administrators are assigned to managing grant projects and writing new proposals. Almost forty percent of the school's revenue comes from federal funds.

With these supplemental grant monies, Means has been able to expand and provide additional resources. A variety of equipment is available for students' use, including supplies for the psycho-motor program, a computer in every room as well as a full computer lab, and television broadcasting equipment.

One example of Means' ability to stay on the lookout for opportunities for the school was the acquisition of broadcasting equipment. When a local television station went out of business, Means took advantage of the opportunity to purchase broadcasting equipment at a substantial discount. Students now use the equipment to produce a daily news program that includes school news, community events, and a weather forecast. This program is taped, taken to a satellite transmission station, and broadcast on a local access channel.

Means also has expertise in construction and contracting for school improvement efforts. With Means overseeing construction projects and installing equipment himself, the district saves funds for use elsewhere.

Providing Professional Development and Training

Professional development and training include teaching, reviewing, and clarifying the knowledge and skills necessary for implementing change. This goes hand in hand with planning and providing resources.

Skill building and professional growth are, in fact, change. Learning to do something new involves initial doubts about one's ability, incremental skill development, some successful experiences, and eventually clarity, meaning, and ownership (Hord, 1992). All of the superintendents interviewed provide staff development and training as a part of the change process in their districts.

McHan believes, "One thing that should be emphasized is that staff development must

be attached to whatever program is chosen. Resources must be set aside for staff development to ensure good implementation."

McHan provided extensive staff development for kindergarten and early elementary teachers to improve mathematics instruction as a part of the district's school improvement efforts. He worked closely with his high school principal before deciding to participate in a national program (Ventures in Education). First, McHan and the principal attended a training session on the program and then a team of teachers were trained in learning styles, cooperative learning, and instructional strategies designed to promote critical thinking skills.

Local resources are committed to staff development. The district funded an opportunity for parents and teachers to visit a site in Alabama that was successfully implementing the Ventures in Education model. McHan concludes, "It takes ingenuity to get staff development adequately funded."

Carlos Atencio negotiated graduate credit hours for his staff who attended classes on the middle school concept at a local university. In addition, Atencio networked with people who were involved with the New Mexico Leadership Academy. He actively pursued involvement by first an elementary school and then the middle school in the training offered by the Academy.

Max Duncan sought out resources to train his staff in several areas. He scheduled trainers from Arkansas and the University of Tulsa to conduct the district's in-service training. By conducting formal workshops within the school, Duncan was able to provide training for his staff on curriculum alignment, multicultural education, science curriculum, and language arts. In addition, the elementary and middle-school staff adopted a program designed to help students with grammar and vocabulary. Videotapes and workbooks were made available to provide refresher courses for teachers.

In addition to specific curriculum training for staff, the grant that Duncan received was used to train his staff on the Marva Collins approach with students. First, Duncan and three of his staff went to Central State University in Edmond, Oklahoma, for training on communication and relationships. From there, the administrators were sent to Chicago to attend training in Marva Collins' methods. Then, two of Duncan's staff members attended a week-long training institute in Chicago. Duncan had selected key staff members who were enthusiastic and willing to share their experiences with other teachers who were unable to attend. This staff selection was key to extending the Marva Collins methods to all staff members. Not only were staff trained in Marva Collins' methods of motivating students, but the workshop "rejuvenated" Duncan, and his enthusiasm helped motivate his staff.

Carthal Means conducted many workshops and meetings to train his staff in the psycho-motor philosophy of teaching all subject areas. Means' enthusiasm for his program kept his staff open to change.

In Summary

Advice from these superintendents to others in small districts trying to implement change includes:

- identify programs that will fit the special needs of the district
- utilize resources available from state

departments and intermediate service agencies
- identify funding sources within school budget
- subscribe to the *Federal Register*
- write and submit grant proposals
- train staff in grant writing techniques
- survey needs of parents
- choose proven programs to replicate
- identify model schools for site visits
- assist in passage of bond issues
- network with colleagues
- work with local institutions of higher education
- conduct workshops
- utilize community resources

Often, access to information in small and rural schools is limited due to their geographic isolation; therefore, the superintendent must take an active role. Staff development and in-service training is sometimes delivered by the administrators. At other times, consultants or specialists provide training. These four superintendents are examples of leaders who actively plan, provide resources, and provide professional development opportunities in order to put innovations in place in their districts.

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